



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL  
Washington D. C. 20250



OCT 2 2003

The Honorable Henry A. Waxman  
Ranking Democratic Member  
Committee on Government Reform  
U.S. House of Representatives  
B-350A Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515-6143

Subject: Food Safety and Inspection Service's Oversight of Production Process  
and Recall at ConAgra Plant (Est. 969)

Dear Congressman Waxman:

In July 2002, the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry asked the Office of Inspector General (OIG) to examine the effectiveness of the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) recall system for meat and poultry products and the effectiveness of USDA's response regarding the 2002 ConAgra recall of 18 million pounds of beef products. We have completed our audit and are transmitting the results with the enclosed copy of the audit report.

The Federal meat inspection program is operated under the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) system adopted in 1998. Under the HACCP program, the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is responsible for verifying that each establishment's food safety system is operating in compliance with the regulations and in a way that will result in safe and wholesome meat products. FSIS is also responsible for verifying that each plant's food safety system is properly designed. Each establishment, in turn, is responsible for designing a food safety system that complies with sanitation performance standards, requirements for sanitation standard operating procedures (SSOP), HACCP requirements, and pathogen reduction activities. The establishment is also responsible for monitoring meat production at every stage of the process to ensure the safety of meat products.

Our audit found that neither ConAgra nor FSIS effectively fulfilled their responsibilities under HACCP. ConAgra did not design or reassess its food safety system to ensure it operated in compliance with SSOP and HACCP requirements. Data were available to both ConAgra and FSIS in the period prior to the recall (January 2001 to the expanded recall) that indicated *E. coli* O157:H7 contamination was becoming a continuous problem at ConAgra. FSIS inspectors did not recognize nor respond to these indicators and followed FSIS policies that effectively limited the documents the inspectors could review and the enforcement actions they were allowed to take.

FSIS needs to be more proactive in its oversight by seeking access to available sources of data and analyzing, on an ongoing basis, the data's importance as indicators of problems that could impact food safety. Also, FSIS needs to reassess its management and oversight of the recall process. The recall was ineffective and inefficient because adequate controls and processes were not in place to timely identify the source (establishment) of the contaminated product or provide reasonable assurance that recovery of the recalled product was maximized or enforcement actions taken as necessary. As of the end of January 2003, only about 3 million pounds of the 18 million pounds of recalled product had been recovered. The majority of the beef was not returned or accounted for.

The recall of ConAgra beef products might have progressed more effectively if FSIS had provided closer monitoring of ConAgra and the establishments that processed its beef. Primarily, FSIS needed to ensure the establishments' HACCP plans were technically sufficient to ensure compliance with HACCP and SSOP requirements. HACCP plans at all three of the plants we reviewed for this audit did not adequately address all food safety hazards.

FSIS generally agreed with the findings and recommendations presented. FSIS has taken some corrective actions and is committed to making cost-effective improvements throughout its programs.

The Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry also asked that we examine USDA's progress on implementing recommendations identified in the OIG's June 2000 review of FSIS' HACCP Implementation, Laboratory Testing of Meat and Poultry Products, Imported Meat and Poultry Inspection Process, and Compliance Activities (Audit Reports Nos. 24001-3-At; 24601-1-Ch; 24099-3-Hy; and 24601-4-At, respectively). This request is being completed in a separate review. The results will be provided to you once it is completed.

We have sent an identical letter to Chairman Davis. If you have any questions, please contact me at (202) 720-8001, or have a member of your staff contact Richard D. Long, Assistant Inspector General for Audit, at (202) 720-6945.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Phyllis K. Fong". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Phyllis K. Fong  
Inspector General

Enclosure